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Positives of Wiradjuri culture underpin remarkable Koori educational program

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A unique community based educational program based on the strengths of Indigenous culture – in particular the traditions of story-telling and sharing and caring – has met with enormous success in Cowra, a NSW country town of 10,000 over 300 kilometres from Sydney.

Such is the success of the concept that it is being touted as having the potential to be adapted in Indigenous communities throughout Australia.

The school-based educational program is *Deadly ReadAthon* which is now in its second year.

“It began in Erambie, the former Aboriginal mission community just outside of Cowra,” said Dr Lawrence Bamblett, a visiting research fellow at the Australian Institute of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Studies (AIATSIS) – and one of the major instigators of the program.

Dr Bamblett, who still lives in the community, said although he may have formally developed the concept, credit for its success should really go to community elders for wanting to continue the Wiradjuri ways of teaching, as well as teachers, principals and parents who are also an integral part of the concept.

“It boiled down to the fact that we needed to encourage our kids to read – to see positives in going to school and to change attitudes that saw them as under-achievers rather than potential achievers,” Lawrie said.

“Too many of our kids, really bright kids, weren’t achieving because they did feel appreciated at school.”

“*Deadly ReadAthon* – in its own way – was a stepping stone to changing that.”

Dr Bamblett said that the idea for building on cultural strengths blossomed in his mind when he saw a young Koori kid nagging a parent to do something for him.

“I thought I wonder if we can get kids to nag - outside of school hours – to listen to them read – to encourage them to read in the home environment.”

“I knew that if we can complete a circle of support, from elders, from teachers, from principals – and parents than we could succeed.”

A one term – read for one day – concept was born with the help of funding from the Federal Department of Education, Employment and Workplace Relations (DEEWR) Parental and Community Engagement grants program.

“It was a near perfect paradigm.”

“We had a need identified by the community, one that in this case found a funding program that enabled the community to negotiate an agreement that found common ground between the community’s goals and the department’s objectives.

Dr Bamblett said that the program was broad enough in its focus and flexibility in the way it is administered so as not to be a burden.

“It encouraged rather than controlled,” he added.

The initial ‘read for one day a week’ pilot was pioneered in Cowra’s primary and secondary schools and because of its success it was extended over a much longer period.

The second phase saw the involvement of 168 primary and secondary school kids.

“127 of them completed the full program and between them they read more than 4,100 books.”

“It demonstrated with overwhelming results that Koori kids will read if motivated and that their level of literacy will improve – in many cases significantly,” Dr Bamblett concluded.

Dr Bamblett some results included:

- A high school boy improving his reading age from 9 to 13 (his actual age) and his daily behaviour improved as well as did his educational results generally for that year he also topped the school’s geography class
- That Aboriginal people in the community were now talking about literacy
- That the flow-in effect was already remarkable even at Erambie’s pre-school where groups of children had organised their own reading group.

“Previously, for many students, the only place they read was at school. The Deadly ReadAthon program has encouraged them to read at home and has encouraged parents to listen to them reading.”

Dr Bamblett said the following comment from the principal of one of the town’s primary schools aptly summed up the program’s success:

“The students from our school who were involved in this project participated with great enthusiasm and the majority made great strides in their reading ages.

“The teachers of the children spoke to me about the motivation the ReadAthon gave to the children, how excited they were to be bringing in their log books and how proud they were when they received their prizes.

“Many of the children took part in the readathon with limited support from home and were able to achieve great results.

“It just goes to show that with the right motivation that all students can make progress.”

Dr Bamblett said above all else it proved to the wider community that with the right approaches Indigenous children can also be achievers.

“Hopefully we have laid the groundwork for the caring and sharing values that underpinned *Deadly ReadAthon* to continue.”

Dr Bamblett said as part of his fellowship at AIATSIS he will undertake research to evaluate this single community program to determine whether an Indigenous community can improve literacy among young people by re-engaging with learning and teaching in culturally appropriate ways.

Such community programs have already gain success in New Zealand.

Te Kotahitanga is a program developed by foundation Professor of Maori Education in the School of Education at the University of Waikato, Professor Russell Bishop.

It was rolled out after teachers in the pilot program area underwent professional development which changed teaching methods and classroom attitudes, resulting in Maori students’ markedly improved school attendance and academic results.

Te Kotahitanga is now Federally funded and involves nearly 400 teachers and more than 10,000 secondary school children and has been adopted by some Canadian schools.

Dr Bamblett and another AIATSIS Indigenous fellow, Dr Jeanine Leane, are currently evaluating the adaptability of this *Te Kotahitanga* for trial in four Australian schools.

Dr Bamblett said he and his family still lived at Erambie. Reflecting on the *Deadly ReadAthon* experiment, he said. “You only have to live there to see the difference it has made.

“If funding continues it will continue to achieve positive change and even continue to have a real impact on the vitality and cohesion of the whole community.”

Picture captions: A group of the “*Deadly ReadAthon*” program participants at a prize presentation night where prizes are awarded to recognise the remarkable efforts of participants. 168 children began the program and 122 completed it and between them read over 4,100 books.

Caption Two: Two of the successful prize winners, Russell Tighe (older boy) and Lindsay Munro.